

“Jonah: A Burden for the Lost”

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...”(Jonah 1:1). In that rather abrupt way, the Book of Jonah in the Old Testament begins. God speaks to Jonah with specific instructions: “Go to Nineveh at once, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). I can imagine Jonah’s reaction: “What, *me* – go to *Nineveh*!” Nineveh was the capital city of *Assyria*. The Assyrians were *enemies* of Israel – an enormous threat to Israel’s safety as a nation. That would be like God telling you to go to Baghdad, Iraq...or Kabul, Afghanistan...or Beijing, China, and preach there!

So Jonah tries to run away from God and the mission to which God’s has called him: “But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:3). He hops on a ship to Tarshish – the exact opposite direction from Nineveh!

The Lord sends a great storm, and the ship is in danger. Jonah, feeling that *he* is the cause of this calamity, urges the sailors to throw him overboard – and finally, reluctantly, they do. Do you remember what happens? “But the Lord provided a large ship to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jonah 1:17). Then after 3 days the Lord commanded the fish and it vomited up Jonah on dry ground.

Further on we read: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you’” (Jonah 3:1-2). God says, “Ok, Jonah, let’s try this again!”

This time Jonah knew better than to try to run from God. He goes to Nineveh and preaches the message God gives him. It’s a blunt message of doom. “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). Guess what! The unexpected happened! The people *listened to his message* – and everyone in the city repented, including the king! (I wish *my preaching* would always be that successful!). The Bible says when God saw that the people of Nineveh turned from their evil ways, He had mercy on them. “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

What a nice ending to story the! But it doesn’t end there. “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry” (Jonah 4:1). Jonah is ticked off at God! Jonah says something like this: “Lord, didn’t I tell you this is what would happen? I knew if they repented that you’d spare them, because you’re such a gracious God. That’s why I ran from You in the first place. I’ve had enough. I want to die!” So he goes outside the city, builds a little covering for shade, and then waits to see what will happen. Maybe God will change His mind and destroy the Ninevites after all!

God causes a big plant to grow over Jonah so he has some extra shade from the hot sun, and he’s happy. But the next morning God sends a worm to chew the plant, and it withers and dies. So he is left out in the scorching sun, and Jonah again moans, “It’s better for me to die than to live.”

God says, “Are you mad about that plant dying?” Jonah replies: “You bet I am, angry enough to die!” And the story ends with this reluctant prophet, Jonah, pouting outside the city. The punch line of this little book is in the last two verses: “Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?’” (Jonah 4:10-11).

Do we get the point? *The narrow, bigoted, unforgiving, vindictive attitude of Jonah is contrasted with the expansive, all inclusive mercy of God. Jonah had little concern for the souls of people!*

How much concern do you and I have for the souls of people? The Lord Jesus, when He was here on earth, revealed a God who cares deeply about all people. This set Jesus at odds with most of the religious leaders. The scribes and Pharisees were more interested in preserving their traditions and observing their religious rituals than reaching out to people with love. Like Jonah, their concern was pretty much limited to themselves, and people like them.

But Jesus reached out to prostitutes, hated tax collectors, and the “unchurched” people of His day and offered them a place in His Father’s kingdom and family. Jesus once said, “The Son of man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He said God is like a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep already safe in the fold in order to seek out one sheep that got lost. *When the Church is like Jesus, we will have a burden for spiritually lost people!*

Maybe one of the problems today is that we don’t really believe people can be lost. We kind of assume that everybody will go to heaven when they die – except, perhaps, the really, really bad people. But Jesus warned of the possibility that we can lose out on entering the kingdom of heaven. For instance, He said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:16-18).

Jesus also provided some sobering words indicating that many people will miss out on salvation and eternal life with God. “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). Also these words of Jesus: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

How concerned are we for people who have not yet come to Christ? Are we like Jonah, or Jesus, in that regard? When is the last time we’ve passionately prayed for someone in our family who

is not a believer to come to Christ? When's the last time we've kneeled before God and pleaded for a friend or co-worker to give their life over to Jesus? When is the last time we've talked to a lost person about how the Savior Jesus can make a difference in their life? When's the last time we've even invited someone to church?

D. Reginald Thomas was a noted radio preacher and pastor, a Presbyterian, as I recall. I once heard him speak at a clergy conference. He told of serving a very sophisticated congregation in New York City – he would go out to dinner in formal attire (tuxes with tails). He said that several times he asked the people of his church for time off – that he had lost a burden for souls – and he had to get it back.

How much concern do we as a congregation have for people without Christ? We in the church can forget the mission Jesus gave us: *to go and make disciples*. We can get sidetracked on all kinds of other things (some may be good, but not be central to our mission). We can get locked into a *maintenance mindset* rather than a *mission mindset*. Time and energy are spent maintaining the institution, keeping things going as they are – rather than seeking ways to reach out to non-Christians. Instead of understanding the culture outside the church and trying to relate to where people really live their lives, we often we tend to isolate and insulate ourselves from those outside the church and huddle together in our own little church enclave.

How much in the church do we do for ourselves, rather than to reach the lost? We can design worship services we like, rather than asking what kind of worship will be more likely to attract unchurched people and speak to their needs. We can have programs geared to meet our interests and needs, rather than developing ministries that address needs of people not coming to church. Of course, those of us already in the church need to be fed spiritually. But so often today churches are so unbalanced in that most of what we do is for us already in the church.

One of my favorite songs, “People Need the Lord”. Hearing this song is a good reminder to me that people really do need the Lord.

Every day they pass me by, I can see it in their eyes.
Empty people filled with care, headed who knows where?
On they go through private pain, living fear to fear.
Laughter hides their silent cries, only Jesus hears.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.
People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
When will we realize, people need the Lord?

We are called to take His light to a world where wrong seems right.
What could be too great a cost for sharing Life with one who's lost?
Through His love our hearts can feel all the grief they bear.
They must hear the Words of Life only we can share.

People need the Lord, people need the Lord
At the end of broken dreams, He's the open door.
People need the Lord, people need the Lord.
When will we realize that we must give our lives,
For people need the Lord. People need the Lord.

All around us are "bad" people who need Jesus. A hardened, 17 year old on his way to court said this: "I been dead since I was 12, so I'm not afraid of dying. I'm just waiting to get kicked into the grave." This young man needs the Lord. But so did Michelle Janis, a "good girl".

Michelle admits she didn't think much about God until she went to college. She got into a sorority unlike most sororities: over half of the girls were Christians. Her first month one of the girls she had become friends with handed her a Bible. "When you're feeling sad," the girl said to Michele, "look here, and when you're feeling lonely, look here." Michelle said she wasn't really interested in reading the Bible or even having one. She had never looked at a Bible in her whole life and wasn't about to start now.

By the end of her first year of college Michelle had a number of good friends who were Christians. She kept noticing how happy they were compared to her. She admits she was even a little jealous. The next year one of her friends invited her to a Bible study, but when Michelle went, she would always have a way of tuning out what she heard.

By the third year of college, she just felt like her life was going in circles. "I never really was a drug addict, I didn't have a wild lifestyle, but inside *I was empty*." Michelle was getting good grades, had good experiences, had lots of friends – but something was missing. Her Christian friends had a peace about them she didn't have. Finally one day she said to God: "God, if Jesus really is your Son, prove it to me." It was only then that she says she felt the Spirit of the Lord and became a new person. Michelle was a "good" young lady – but she needed the Lord, too!

Jonah had little burden for the souls of people. He was so unlike Jesus!

What are some ways we can live with a greater sense of concern for people without Christ?

First of all, make sure that we ourselves know the Lord. We can be a church member, attend church, be a nice person, and still not be saved. Until we have discovered the joy of salvation and what a positive difference Christ is making in our life, we certainly will not have a concern for others' souls.

We can develop friendships with unbelievers.

One of the things that often happens is that the longer we are a Christian, the more we tend to hang out with Christians, and any friendships with non-Christians diminish. Some Christians don't even have un-Christian friends or acquaintances. Here's a practical suggestion: Ask God to help us build new friendships with non-Christian

Then too, we can invite unchurched people to church. Some of us never even think of inviting a family member, friend or neighbor who doesn't go to church, to come to church with us.

We can also develop a lifestyle that looks for opportunities to share our faith. Al Braca worked as a corporate bond trader. His office was on the 105th floor of Tower One in the World Trade Center. A week after the tower was hit and collapsed, Al's body was found in the rubble.

According to his wife Jeannie, Al hated his job. He couldn't stand the environment. It was a world completely out of sync with his Christian values. But he wouldn't quit. He was convinced that God wanted him to stay there, to be a light in the darkness. Al's family learned that Al had indeed been ministering to people during the attack. Reports trickled in from friends and acquaintances. Some people on the 105th floor had made a last call or sent e-mails to a loved one saying that "a man" was leading people in prayer. A few referred to Al by name. When Al realized that they were trapped in the building and would not be able to escape, he shared the gospel with a group of 50 coworkers and led them in prayer. Al Braca had lifestyle where sharing the gospel was one of his top priorities.

Many Christians live day to day and don't even think about sharing our faith with others. Sure, it may stretch us out of our comfort zone. But what's wrong with that! I've made a new commitment to ask God each morning that, if possible, I may have opportunities to share my faith with someone.

Finally, as a church, we can strive to make reaching lost people a priority. Let's look at what we do in the church, and evaluate whether what we do is just for us, or to win people to Christ. Then we can focus more on doing things geared to reaching others for the Lord.

A burden for the lost.

Are we like Jonah? Or like Jesus? Well, I want to be like Jesus. Don't you?

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